people know How

Unlocking Your ideas

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Body image, social media & young people

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Edited by Arabella Stephenson

November 2020

Abstract

This article will consider the role of social media and images within online platforms (such as Facebook and Instagram) on the body image and self-esteem development of young people. This article will therefore discuss what impacts both body positive (images that promote acceptance of all body shapes) and "fitspo" (images designed to promote a particular body image) posts have on young people and their development of self-esteem. Finally, this article will consider what role adults have in supporting young people to navigate social media in a way that promotes a more positive self-image. In doing so, it is hoped that adults can be better equipped to support and encourage the constructive use of imagery and social media with positive outcomes for young people.

Keywords

Body image, self-esteem, young people, social media

Key points

- Social media imagery presents challenges to the wellbeing of young people.

- Young people are increasingly turning towards social media for health and wellbeing information.

- Adults are unprepared to help young people navigate this process positively.

The issue

Images on social media heavily influence what young people think about themselves and their body image. Social media also provides young people with health-related information, and although many young people do not necessarily focus intently on the material they are viewing, young people do change their health behaviours related to what they have accessed online (Goodyear et al 2019). Most young people access social media with a critical eye and have positive experiences online (Goodyear 2020). Nevertheless, Yang et al (2020) found that there was a correlation between the number of times a young person viewed a 'selfie' and 'facial dissatisfaction' (i.e. how much negativity a young person felt about their own facial appearance). They also found that there was a higher chance of dissatisfaction if the young person engaged in self-objectification and that directing and supporting young people to value their bodies for what they can do, rather than how they look, would be of benefit. However, Goodyear et al (2018) found that adults (parents, teachers, youth workers) and the media do not understand the pressures that social media places on young people, nor are they able to respond adequately. Therefore, it is imperative that adults understand this connection, and respond in a way that best supports young people accessing social media.

This article aims to highlight the research around body image for young people and how positive body image can be achieved. This article will also discuss the impacts of social media on young people's body image, with a focus on the differences between 'BoPo' (posts that promote body positivity) and 'FitsPo' (posts that promote exercise and diet) content. Finally, the article will conclude with a brief overview of what adults can do to help support young people navigate the social media world.

People Know How

People Know How's Positive Transitions service provides direct support to children and young people in Edinburgh and East Lothian. Their work focuses on children and young people during the transition between primary and secondary school (People Know How 2018). Glencross (2020) argued that the transition between primary and secondary school was a challenging and difficult period for children and young people. Therefore, Positive Transitions aims to help children and young people during this crucial period, by providing them with a range of services, including befriending, family support, group work and arts therapies (People Know How 2020). Social media use in young people, particularly when related to body image, is of concern for adults (Rich 2018). This research article aims to help the adults involved in the lives of the children referred to Positive Transitions better navigate supporting young people with social media use. This is of importance, particularly when stopping social media use is "likely to be a challenge and unthinkable" for young people (Goodyear 2020:48).

What is body image?

According to Young Minds, the national charity for children and young people's mental health, body image is the way we think about ourselves and the way we see ourselves physically (Young Minds 2020). Body Image is of high concern for young people; 16 – 25 years olds rate it as the third largest concern for them and 46% of girls and 25% of boys say that body image causes them to worry (Mental Health Foundation 2019). However, body image is not merely being happy or dissatisfied with the way your body looks. Neumark-Sztainer et al (2006) found that poor body image (or body dissatisfaction) led to dangerous health-related behaviours that could in fact make someone less healthy. They found that the more dissatisfied young women were with their body, the more likely that they would engage in dieting, unhealthy weight control measures and binge eating. Therefore, to encourage and support young people to engage in behaviours that promote health and wellbeing, they need to have a good body image. Subsequently, Stice et al (2011) suggested that there was a correlation between body image and eating disorders, with body dissatisfaction being the greatest risk factor in

adolescent girls for the emergence of a clinical eating disorder. It seems clear, therefore, that body image is not merely how we feel about ourselves but is also a potential route to behaviours that could cause additional harm to our bodies. Positive body image is therefore not just beneficial for the happiness of young people, but also vital to protect their overall health and wellbeing.

The way we view our bodies is not something inherent in us, but is something we are taught, or learn, throughout our lives. The Mental Health Foundation (2019) found that there were four main sources that impacted the body image and body satisfaction of young people – body ideal internalisation; media and social media; parents and family members; and peers. Body ideal internalisation is how we feel inside, when we hold ourselves up to a perceived body ideal. For instance, if a young person views a certain body to be the ideal, accepted body type, and perceives themselves to not meet this ideal, they may feel shame or embarrassment. These ideas of what constitutes the ideal body can come from media and social media. Family members, and peers, can have negative impacts on body image through teasing, diet talk, and the negative way peers discuss their bodies. 'Fitting in' with peers can influence how young people alter their appearance, as well as the subsequent pressure they experience if they are unable to meet those perceived standards.

The impact of images, captions, and selfies on body image

BoPo and Fitspo

Within social media, two strands of body image content have become apparent – Body Positivity (or BoPo) and Fitspiration (or Fitspo). Body positivity is defined as a movement of people who are striving to show that acceptance of all bodies, regardless of shape, size and ability, should be the norm. Body positivity can help young people feel better about themselves and become more comfortable in their own bodies (Young Minds 2020). Fitspiration, on the other hand,

is content that promotes the 'ideal' body, and encourages behaviours to obtain this body – such as diet and exercise (Carrotte et al 2017).

Exposure to body positive content has been shown to have a beneficial impact on the wellbeing, mood and body satisfaction of young women (Cohen et al 2019). This study showed the difference between viewing body positive images compared to 'thin ideal' content (i.e., images that promoted the body ideal of being thin - fitspiration). Thin ideal images had the opposite effect on young women. Davies et al (2020) studied the impact of both the images and the captions shared on social media. They found that 'fitspiration' captions were more likely to lead to an increase in negative mood. However, body positive captions did not influence mood at the time but did impact general body image after young people read body positive captions. Therefore, images and captions within social media platforms that promote a realistic range of bodies in society, will have an influence on the body image and wellbeing of young people.

The way young people use social media also correlates with the desire to have the ideal body, depending upon the reason the young person is using a social media site or app. For example, young girls are more likely to use social media to share images of themselves, clothing, and comment on friends' posts (Sugimoto et al 2020). This use of social media is linked to an increased likelihood of young people having a 'desire for slimness'. However, the same study did not find the same correlation for young boys, and the reasons considered for this was due to the way young boys tend to use sites to comment, make connections and share opinions (Sugimoto et al 2020).

Selfies

Even though the taking of selfies (individual photos of self) seems frequent among young people, posting these on social media is less common (McLean et al 2019). Selfies, and the process involved in taking a selfie worthy of being shared, has a negative impact on wellbeing with no obvious difference between

men and women (Lonergan et al 2019). The taking of the selfie, and then sharing it online, is only the first step of the selfie process. Once shared, the way peers relate to this selfie has a positive or negative impact on young people, depending on the response (McLean et al 2019). Therefore, there is a lot of energy involved in selfies, with young people spending a long time attempting to perfect the ideal selfie and share the image they believe is likely to be most well received by others. Once this process has been completed, peer response can alter the way that the young person perceives their body image – negative, or no feedback for instance, could convince the young person that they do not meet the ideal image for their peers. This can lead to the young person using filters on photos to change their online appearance to be accepted more by their peers.

The role of adults

Firstly, it is important to understand that young people are not always blindly accepting of what they observe on social media, and they can navigate the content critically at times (Goodyear and Armour 2018). However, adults underestimate young people's ability to navigate social media including possible pitfalls and negative impacts that could be experienced (Goodyear et al 2018). The Mental Health Foundation (2020) separated their guidance into three categories – at home, at school and in the media.

At home

Hart et al (2014) suggested that there are a range of approaches parents and carers could take at home to best support their children to grow up with good body image. These approaches include modelling behaviour that seeks to develop positive body image (this would include not being negative about their own body and having positive eating and exercise attitudes). Praise should also be focused on the child's skills and abilities, instead of on their bodily attributes. There should be a focus on how everyone deserves respect, regardless of how they look, and

children should be encouraged to discuss their feelings about their body and learn to cope with comments being made by others. Finally, parents and carers should refrain from expecting children to conform to unrealistic body ideals and avoid insinuating that children will be more liked if they change their body.

At school

Yager et al (2013) found that school programmes designed to create a positive effect on body image were most effective if they targeted 12-13 year olds, had a focus on critical media use and self-esteem, included peers and were also multi – session. Bray et al (2018) found that the best school-based approach was a whole school approach, that created a body positive ethos. Therefore, body positive sessions, alongside a focus on promoting body positivity throughout each year group helps to create a culture that supports the development of positive body image.

The media

In relation to the media, the approaches here are two-fold. Parents need to facilitate some of the approaches, whereas children and young people need to be supported to be more confident in using media. MH2K (2018), which was a study led by young people to understand young people's mental health, recommended that parents are supported to help young people to be able to use social media independently, but with safety in mind. They also suggested that social media sites need to include the ability to conceal comments, likes and followers. McLean et al (2016) suggested that the young people needed to be supported to develop media literary. Media literacy is defined as the ability to be critical when accessing and creating media and to be able to better understand the validity and benefit of what is being consumed. Media literacy education can also be used to help young people find suitable accounts to follow on social media that promote a more body positive outlook.

Conclusion

The development of positive body image is not a simple task, but instead requires a multi-faceted approach that incorporates the whole adult team around the child or young person, as well as the child or young person. However, regardless of how challenging it may be, it is required and should be part of any focus with young people, especially when working with or using imagery and social media. Poor body image has a negative impact upon children and young people's self-esteem and mood, and unchallenged it does increase the risks of eating disorders or disordered eating and unhealthy behaviours starting.

Social media, and social media content, plays a significant role in how children develop their body image. Content can be positive and can show young people images and content that helps them to develop a robust knowledge of body positivity. However, content can be negative, and can promote and encourage behaviours that do not support good health and wellbeing. Adults need to be aware of these differences, as well as the impacts their own behaviours can have on young people, so that they can be better equipped to support young people to gain confidence and become more positive about their bodies.

For People Know How, this article provides the necessary literature to help develop a body positivity approach within Positive Transitions. This could include targeted projects to highlight the need for more critical use of social media, promotion of body positivity and group work with young people to help them better understand the impact of social media on their health and wellbeing. Additionally, planned projects with Studies in Photography can be used to introduce young people to a positive use of photography.

Recommendations

- Adults should model positive behaviours related to their own body image and health.

- Adults should support young people to access social media independently, but with a focus on safety to ensure that young people are supported.

- Young people should be encouraged to develop media literacy, so that they can be more critical when viewing and consuming social media content.

- Schools should adopt a whole-school approach that encourages body positivity and that promotes healthy behaviours, without focussing on body shape and size.

- Social media sites need to find ways to support young people accessing their sites that ensure they can remain safe.

- Supporting body image and wellbeing needs to be a collaborative approach between the young person and the adults who support them.

- Befriending projects, such as that provided by People Know How's, Positive Transitions service, should include a focus on body image, self-esteem, and social media use, when appropriate.

Further research

This article was limited by the literature on body image and social media use for young people, and although this literature is vast and of high quality, much of the literature was absent of the young person's voice. Therefore, there would be a considerable benefit to conducting research alongside young people that centres their experiences and knowledge on this topic. Additionally, much of the literature contained within this article had a focus on girls. Therefore, an article that centred the experiences of boys would be beneficial in understanding the possible differences between the two.

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